Christian Economics
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Psalm 68:1–8, 32–35
Acts 16:16–23
Acts 19:21–41

"God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity."
Psalm 68:6 (NRSV)

If this is God's world and if the rule of love is at work, then our mandate is not to draw into a cocoon of safety: rather it is to be out and alive in the world in concrete acts and policies whereby the fearful anxiety among us is dispatched and adversaries can be turned to allies and friends.

Walter Brueggemann
Mandate to Difference

An article in the* Chicago Tribune *this morning covers the change in the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s ordination standards, which eliminates the prohibition against the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers, elders, and deacons and replaces it with a more inclusive, and many of us believe, more faithful and gracious standard.

It is called Amendment 10A, and it takes effect this morning. The* Tribune *article tells the story of one of our members and candidates for ordination, Jeannine Oakes.

It is an important day in the life of our church, a long-awaited day. And for some it is deeply troubling.

So in that spirit of joy and gratitude, of disappointment and sadness in our church, let us pray:

Lord of the church, Lord of us all,
we thank you for your gracious presence in the church,

always advocating, pressing, urging
for more grace, forgiveness, love, acceptance.

We pray this morning for those who have waited,
prayed, and worked for this day,
and we pray for those whose hearts are heavy.
Bind us all together in the tether of your Spirit,
in which there is a spacious grace and room for all.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and your love,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"Everywhere Jesus goes, good stuff happens," Walter Bruggemann says. Wherever Jesus is, wherever his people are, there is likely to be more compassion, more caring, more healing and educating, more hospitals and orphanages, more humane social structures. You can make a good historical argument that good stuff happens wherever Jesus goes. But there is another thing. Before good things happen, frequently there is conflict.

In the decades following his crucifixion and resurrection, the Jesus movement slowly but surely began to move out of Jerusalem. His first followers were Jews. Things became complicated for them when Gentiles showed interest in their message. It was a major development, with far-reaching implications, when the leadership of the movement, in Jerusalem—including the original apostles and Jesus' brother James—struggled with the issue and finally decided that the good news was for everyone; that Gentiles were welcome. The result was that a tiny movement within first-century Judaism suddenly had a worldview as big and broad as the world itself, one that transcended old boundaries of race and nationality and religion.

British scholar James Crossley has written a fascinating book, *Why Christianity Happened,* and observed all the secular, sociological, and political reasons for Christianity's unlikely success. Roman roads and transportation and communication networks were part of it. So was a common language—Greek. Crossley observes that Paul and the early Christian evangelists focused on households: it was customary for entire households—extended families, servants, and slaves—to be baptized at once. It was not only numerically productive, it simply ignored or transcended the strict social order of owners, servants, slaves, treating all in the same way as equals. There was a basic egalitarianism about the early Christian movement that was fascinating and compelling.

The book describes all the secular reasons for Christianity's spread. But the truth is it had everything in the world to do with one of the most intriguing, remarkable men in history: the Apostle Paul. He was a Jew, a Pharisee, a scholar, a tentmaker by trade. He spoke the same Greek that everyone in

the Roman Empire spoke, and he was a Roman citizen. Paul—or Saul, as he was first known—was a persecutor of the first Christians and then became a Christian and became convinced that his vocation, his purpose on earth, was to bring Jesus Christ, Christianity, to the Gentile world, which meant all the world outside Palestine. And so he traveled throughout the Roman Empire, by ship, horseback, and by foot, to every major city, where he preached in synagogues, on street corners, in private homes.

Eventually he too was arrested and executed in Rome. It was, of course, too late. Paul had spread the good news far and wide, and in his wake there were small communities of believers in every city. They had begun to call themselves Christians and the new community, the ecclesia, the church.

It was not all roses for Paul. In fact, everywhere he went there was opposition, some of it intellectual—in Athens, for instance—some of it social and political, and some of it economic.

In the Greek city of Philippi, Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, encounter a young girl, a slave, who has “a spirit of divination.” She is different, odd, bizarre, says and does outrageous things. The ancient world thought she was demon-possessed. We would describe her as mentally ill, bipolar, psychotic. Her owners, however, are using her and her peculiarity very profitably. It was said that she could tell fortunes: people paid her owners lots of money. For some reason she becomes fascinated with Paul and Silas, follows them around the streets, shouts to startled passersby to listen to these men, says they are spokespersons for God. Paul becomes annoyed with her for the embarrassing attention he really doesn’t want. So he confronts her, says to the demon he and everyone else believes has possessed her, “I command you to come out of her.” And whatever psychological terms you want to use, it happened. She became quiet, serene, well; no more bizarre behavior and wild predictions. Her owners, for obvious reasons, are not happy” “There goes our livelihood.” So they stir up the crowd. They accuse Paul and Silas of being enemies of the way of life enjoyed by the people of Philippi. The crowd becomes a mob; the police intrude, flog Paul and Silas, and throw them in jail. Significant economic interests have been threatened.

Now Paul is in Ephesus, modern Turkey, an amazing archeological site with splendid ruins. Ancient Ephesus was the site of the cult of Artemis, a goddess of fertility with many breasts. Artemis was big. Her temple in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. She was an industry, the economic driver in Ephesus, with the huge temple and its upkeep, its priests and attendants and the silver jewelry. Silversmiths came to Ephesus to make tiny pendants, rings, pins, brooches—all sorts of silver gadgets—bearing the image of Artemis. Tourists on pilgrimage from all over the world spent money on lodging and food. Artemis, Inc., was big business.

Wherever Jesus goes, good stuff happens, but what else happened in Ephesus was sales of Artemis jewelry started to fall off. Everyone knew why. The traveling preacher, Paul, was saying that gods made by human hands were not really gods. There was one God who was larger than any human representation. God's son was Jesus, and the only symbolic representation anyone needed was a cross.

So an Ephesian entrepreneur, a businessman by the name of Demetrius, who made a lot of money selling silver replicas of the Shrine of Artemis, calls a meeting of the silversmiths, suggests that they not simply passively watch as business evaporates. They take to the streets, essentially start a riot, and accuse Paul of undermining not only their income, but the whole economy and their way of life, their religion. "Artemis is great! Artemis is great!" they chant as what now has become a huge mob heads to the amphitheater for an Artemis rally. Violence is averted, for now, when the town clerk intercedes.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ has confronted powerful economic forces and in the process liberated a poor, defenseless, and very sick young girl from her exploitation and captivity. And it has taken on an industry profiting enormously from people's trust and faith. Surely in both cases the slave girl's owners and the silversmiths were saying, "We don't mind a little religion, but when it challenges the system and interferes with our bottom line, it is too much and has to stop." It's tough going, but some Christian leaders have always spoken for the dispossessed, the poor, against powerful economic interests; have argued for the right to organize into labor unions, for minimum wage, for humane benefits for workers, for freedom.

There is in the Bible a deep and powerful commitment to the poor, the weak and vulnerable, the economically disadvantaged. The psalm we read together, Psalm 68, is one of the oldest, and it has to do with the very heart of our faith, what we believe about God. In fact, biblical scholars see in it images and words that go all the way back to ancient Canaanite religion. God is imagined as the powerful life force, the inspirer of storms and thunder who rides on clouds. God is to be worshiped and adored and praised. It is a notion common to all human worship of the Creator: it begins in awe and mystery and praise. Millennia later we are still standing to sing as we gather and begin our weekly worship:

> Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
> Praise God, all creatures here below
> Praise God above, you heavenly host.

But then, inserted in the middle of the song of praise, a new and uniquely Judaic notion of who God is, a new theology. God not only as the storm God,

the cloud rider, but, of all things, the father of orphans, protector of widows, a God who leads prisoners, exiles, and captives and shelters the homeless. That is a very new and radical theology: a God who pays attention to the weakest, most vulnerable, most ordinarily disposable members of society.

The religion of ancient Israel, from which both modern Judaism and Christianity came, has a unique and deep and powerful commitment to the poor, the left-out, the marginalized. In this tradition, how the little ones, the poor ones, are treated is a spiritual, religious, as well as economic, priority. One of the unique dimensions of the ancient law of Moses is that farmers are instructed not to harvest 100 percent of their crops but to leave a portion unharvested for the poor and the resident alien. A portion of the grapes on the vine and olives in the trees are to be left to provide for the hungry. It is a God priority, which became a priority for the faithful community (see Walter Bruggemann, *Mandate to Difference*).

Jesus reflected it when he fed the hungry, touched the untouchables, welcomed to the table those rejected by society, healed the sick and lame, and held in his arms the littlest ones, the disposable ones in Roman culture, the weakest and most vulnerable in any culture.

There is not an economic system prescribed in the Bible, although people often claim that there is: “Capitalism is the biblical economy”; “No, it’s socialism”; “No, actually it’s communism,” which the early church actually tried for a while. But there is a biblical and moral economic compass, and it has everything in the world to do with how those who are not benefiting from the system are treated; how, for instance, those who are outside our amazing health care system—which I personally have more reason to be grateful for than anyone—how those outside the system, with no insurance, no way into the system except the emergency room, which has become our shameful and very expensive, health care system for the poor, how everyone sharing in health care is a moral and religious issue. In a biblical context, how the weakest, the most vulnerable children are being treated is the number-one moral issue. It’s not abortion. It’s not same-sex marriage. It’s the children, the poor children. Not the children who go to school in a wealthy suburb, where the per capita expenditure for each child’s education is more than $20,000. It’s the children whose parents have to wonder if they’ll be shot at recess, where student expenditure is exactly one half of what it is for the child fortunate enough to be born in one of the northern suburbs.

Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine and an evangelical activist, challenges his friends in the religious right by saying that the two most critical family moral values are education and health care, the two

absolutely necessary commodities for any child with a future that is hopeful and not an American tragedy.

It is a complicated and challenging time economically. The president, Congress, our governor and state legislature, our mayor and city council all face an incredible challenge. We have spent and are spending more money than we have. Deficits and debts are huge and unsustainable. Something has to give, and our best thinkers are telling us that now is the time. And it is a moral issue that we address this crisis responsibly for our children and grandchildren.

For Christians, heirs of this wonderful old tradition of responsibility for the poor and most vulnerable, there is a moral compass. However politicians resolve it, it must not be by sacrificing the welfare of poor people and their children. Our moral compass will not allow this. It is not for us to tell Congress and the state legislature how to do it: cut spending, raise revenue, a little of each. It is our God-given responsibility to hold out for the least of these, who our Lord Jesus Christ told us are our brothers and sisters, our family members.

St. Paul's encounters with the slave girl's owners in Philippi and the silversmiths in Ephesus are a microcosm of the forces in the midst of which you and I live today.

We may not want the job, but to believe in the God of the Bible and God's Son, Jesus Christ, is to have responsibility for those who have no voice and suffer from all the degradations and implications of poverty in this affluent society.

Fourth Church strives to represent that responsibility by investing in programs designed to stand with and assist our neighbors.

A favorite is the Chicago Lights Summer Day program: 100 city youngsters, some from neighborhoods so violent that the children are afraid to go outside, come here every day for six weeks for healthy, wholesome activities —field trips, games, study, food, and, of course, safety.

Approximately 40 percent of this church's resources are invested in standing with our neighbors.

We take this responsibility seriously and, as we are able, globally. We support Presbyterian World Mission, an amazing network of schools, colleges, hospitals, clinics, and churches. We send work groups to build houses in Central America, to help in an AIDS clinic in Cameroon.

And we are involved with a coalition of other Presbyterian churches to do what we can to stand with the people of the Middle East by making investments in the emerging Palestinian economy.

And, of course, we can at least monitor our lifestyles, our own use of the resources God has given us. We are, after all, the first people in all of history to have our health threatened not by hunger, but by too much food. Our family remembers a stunning incident that happened to us years ago in the Western Highlands of Scotland. It was 1973. Scotland was not a poor country, but in the decades following World War II, it had learned to live with limits. The refrigerator in the small manse was tiny. Our milk consumption, with five children, was huge, although we never thought of it that way. Milk was delivered to the little grocery store in our little village in one-pint plastic bags. You placed the bag in a plastic holder, snipped off the corner, and poured. We sent our two little boys, ages nine and seven, to the store to buy ten bags of milk. They came home with four. “What happened?” we asked. “The man wouldn’t give them to us,” they explained. “You don’t need that much milk,” he said.

We are, of course, still telling that story and laughing at it and, I suspect, pondering it and still feeling just a little uncomfortable that the Scottish grocer might have had a point.

It wouldn’t hurt any of us to ponder and to remember that there is something about our faith in the God who came among us in Jesus Christ that redefines each of us, each human being, not as a consumer, a cog in a huge, impersonal economic system, but as a precious child of God, whom God wishes and intends to have abundant life, life lived in love and care and responsibility for the communities in which we live—our neighborhood, our city, our nation, our world. You and I are responsible moral agents, commissioned to love with a love as big and broad and inclusive as God’s love. This faith of ours is in a Lord who cares about all of life, not just the religious part but our life together, in the world; a Lord who makes us responsible for one another—our dear ones, our next-door neighbors, our brothers and sisters on the West and South Sides of Chicago, the North Side, in Cameroon and Guatemala and the West Bank—all of us, together, the one family of the amazing God of love and grace whom we know in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.